

The Embarkation for Cythera

Richard Calder

The city rose from a shelf of permanent ice, a glass ocean surrounded by dawn-drenched glaciers. The neon-beaded highway snaked in and out of the Bentley's lights, the prismatic sheen of the road inducing a slurry of tiredness in my eyes, the desolation of McMurdo Sound viewed as if through lashes sodden with gasoline. Dahlia leaned across the upholstery, swung a thigh over my own and put the Bentley into fourth. Jarred, the glove compartment flapped open, spilling soiled underwear, make-up, a .22 auto, hypodermic, speculum and food-ration cards. Tall buildings rushed towards us – folds, waves and twists, the fractured planes and multiple trajectories of cosmogenic architecture that clung like monstrous, rococo vegetation to the more familiar overtures of the International Style – and then we were thundering through the abandoned ruins of the city limits. The car's heaters were insolent; they were downright wanton; the air seemed alive with the contrapuntal buzzing of flies. Dahlia, unconsolated, pressed herself against me, greedy for the other-earthly warmth which the rising sun would soon rescind. I felt the jellied deliciousness of a breast through her furs. My loins hardened. Had 15 years in His Majesty's secure institutions proved sanative? No; I had been free just 15 weeks and I was again her slave. On the dashboard I had pinned a photograph from the pages of *Vogue* or *Elle* that depicted a half-dozen sloe-eyed supermodels sprawling, lounging and provocatively draped amongst the grey, petrified ruins of

Auschwitz-Birkenau; and it occurred to me as I drove that the history of the modern world, my history, perhaps, was like one long frenzied act of coupling, its 21st-century orgasm all that I had known, no foreplay, just a timeless explosion of white heat, this checkmate of sex amongst the ruins.

"Spare me the dildonics; spare me the cojone-baloney," said Dahlia, in a *touché* to my thoughts, "just get me to a karaoke. Fast." Throughout late summer the light pouring over the glaciers and mountains had hit at too sharp an angle to warm ice or flesh; still we had had to run from the dawn; even now, as the continent rolled towards perpetual night, daybreak, however anaemic, signalled meltdown. I switched off the Bentley's lamps. All those movies, *A Princess of Death*, *Kung-Fu Nymphet from Hell*, *The Kingdom of Childhood*, *A Chinese Killer Virgin in LA*. Dahlia was accustomed to more torrid climes. "The sun's almost up. I can feel the UV disrupting my atomic structure." An anxious bass line started up inside my skull, found its way down my neck, along my arm until, transposed into a tic by my ghost's burgeoning incorporeality (she, one of the fibresphere's damned; a copy divorced from its original; fame evolved into a separate, alien form of life; a new morphology congealed out of the mediascape, the hyper-universe that interpenetrates our own) my fingers began to paradiddle against the dash. "Hurry. I'm starting to dissolve." Signs of habitation began to manifest themselves; became insistent. Frantically, I

offered by, say, movies. But while they're fun to watch, and the PoV tracks and hidden cuts make the best of an impossible brief, the results remain frankly rather clunky and unconvincing compared with the less flashy, yet wonderfully adventurous and assured, main action. It's not the most interesting thing about her, but she does direct violence well; and gender is, whether we want it or not, important. It's important to our response to the images of sexual murder to know that they were shot by a woman (so she can't be getting off on them, can she?).

More important, though, Bigelow is a far less classical, establishment kind of director than (for example's sake) Cameron; and *Strange Days* has profited immensely from her sharper sense of environment and style. Her taste in soundtrack, for one, has always been rather snappy compared with the very conservative gentleman Jim's. (KB it was in *Near Dark* period who, in a rare moment of outright tongue-in-cheek, stuck New Order in Spinal Tap wigs for a dino-metal video of "Touched by the Hand of God.") For *Strange Days*, we have Graham Revell and Deep Forest where Cameron might have settled for James Horner – to say nothing of a whole album's worth of toe-tapping top pop melodies dropped in by the likes of Skunk Anansie, Tricky and (bizarrely) Juliette Lewis sings Polly Jean Harvey. By contrast, I assume the largely-pointless Jim Morrison title, one of the very few weak things about the film, is Cameron's contribution – the song does get a token look-in, but only in a barely-recognizable clubadub cover "featuring Ray Manzarek" (inconspicuously).

In a film this information-rich, there are plenty of nits one could pick if so inclined. Some of the studiously cyberhip dialogue ("It's pure and uncut, straight from the cerebral cortex") is pretty laughable, and no amount of clever relationship-mirroring (as a key scene spells out, Mace:Lenny::Lenny:Faith) can paper over the utter incredibility of Fiennes, or anyone else, ever preferring the tiresome, whiney Juliette Lewis over the astonishing Angela Bassett character. (It's probably unfair to assume, as I'm afraid I do, that all Cameron scripts are about his ex-wives, but even if the Bassett figure isn't in any sensible sense based on the director she's still the most jawdropping of all Cameron's long line of fantasy girls. Not only is she long, black, and drop-down-dead with style coming out of her pores, but at heart she's basically just a working single mom who happens to dress like a goddess, burn a fab set of wheels, and totally kickbox every ass in range because it's the only way she can pay for the childcare.)



Ralph Fiennes and Angela Bassett in *Strange Days* ...the sheer number of false endings enjoyably destabilizes a raft of classical film conventions and certainties...

Overplotted *Strange Days* certainly is, with the ending looking as if it's been through one or two rewrites too many, and the identity of the key villain neither as dramatic nor as convincing as it might have been, after so many deft deflections of suspicion from this and several other candidates. It's nice that the crude conspiracy scenario is itself in the end a false trail, though maybe less happy that, after so many twists and teases in the conspiracy plotting, the LAPD emerges so unexpectedly – or rather not, given the degree of cooperation afforded – squeaky spotless. But the sheer number of false endings enjoyably destabilizes a raft of classical film conventions and certainties, and it's particularly gratifying to see the creaky old "all we have to do is get this McGuffin to the media" scenario

(such faith in free speech; it surely wouldn't happen here) subjected to a touch of Rodney King-inspired realism. By the time we arrive, somewhat to our surprise, at the post-shootout classical cliché clinch, this and any other conventional ending have been effectively deconstructed by the cascade of trapdoor endings that precedes. "Ain't nothing means nothing, man," comments the great Tom Sizemore upstaging machine on the final plot revelation: "the whole planet's in fuckin' chaos." A less great movie might have thrown that word about more.

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